



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## PORTRAIT OF A LADY: MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

Merely as a literary figure, as a writer, Madame de Sévigné amply justifies her claim to celebrity in the greatest age of French letters. As a mistress of style she is the worthy contemporary of Molière, Corneille, Pascal, and La Fontaine.

Yet she wrote only letters and wrote those letters as naturally as she talked. Just before her came Balzac and Voiture, who wrote epistles, after the fashion of Pliny and James Howell. Now Madame de Sévigné knows that she writes well and takes pride in it, just as Cicero did; but, like him, she knows that letters, to be of any interest, must be sincere, must be written for matter, not manner. Hers, she says, flow from her heart direct, pour fourth all the passion, the curiosity, the laughter of the moment. Often she does not even reread them before sending. The far-fetched felicities of a laborious writer fill her with disgust. Of the style of one such she says, "It is insupportable to me. I had rather be coarse than be like her. She makes me forget delicacy, refinement, and politeness, for fear of falling into her juggler's tricks. Now isn't it sad to become just a mere peasant?"

Peasant or not, she makes the whole wide world of the French seventeenth century live in her letters, as does Saint-Simon in his memoirs somewhat later, and in Madame de Sévigné it lives more vividly, if in Saint-Simon more profoundly. The great affairs of princes and their petty humanness, the splendor of war and its hideous cruelty, intrigues of courtiers, intrigues of lovers, new books, prayers, fashion, folly, tears, and laughter, all mingle in her pages and help us understand to-day and to-morrow by their deep and startling similitude with yesterday. As "human documents" these letters have rarely been surpassed.

But the most interesting thing in her letters is her soul, and she lays bare every fold and fibre of it without the slightest bravado of self-revelation, but also without any attempt at reserve or concealment. She defies our minutest curiosity, because she could.

Above all, she was of a healthy, normal temperament, with all the elements delightfully blended, a rich human creature of balance and sanity. She knew well that life is of a mingled yarn, at its best not far from bitterness. She knew well what passion is, what grief is. This is just what makes her so rounded and so human. But in most things she held a sure rein and kept her heart in reasonable harmony with her intelligence.

As a practical manager she was admirable. Her husband, who fortunately died early, was a spendthrift. So was her son, and her daughter not much better. But the wife and mother knew the excellent utility of money, watched carefully her great estate, scolded her agents, spent largely when she could, and when she could not, went without. She accuses herself of avarice, as the avaricious never do. But we know that she was prudent, and forethoughtful, and discreet. I am sure, also, that she was perfect mistress of her household. But it is a strange thing that a woman, writing a thousand of the frankest long letters, should say scarcely a word about her servants. Could you imitate her, madam? And do you not agree with me that it is an indication of strong sense and native tact?

But let us trace further the charming many-sidedness of this beautifully rounded temperament. She was a Parisian, a dweller with brick and mortar, her ears well tuned to the hubbub of city streets, yet she loved the country, not for hasty week-ends of dress and gossip, but for its real quiet and solitude. She felt its melancholy. "In these woods reveries sometime fall upon me so black that I come out of them as if I had had a touch of fever." And when she rambles under the shade of melancholy boughs, with Madame de La Fayette and La Rochefoucauld, whose company one would not have supposed exhilarating, their conversations are "so dismal that you would think there was nothing else to do but bury us." Yet the quick, sweet reaction of her sunny temper shows in the very next sentence. "Madame de La Fayette's garden is the loveliest thing in the world. It is all flowers, all sweetness." She herself assures her friends that they need not fear that country solitude will bore her and make her morbid. "Except for pangs of heart, against which I am too weak, there is nothing

to pity me for. I am naturally happy and get on with everything and am amused with everything." So, if the song of a nightingale could fill her eyes with tears, in another instance, like the merry Phædra, she could "laugh at shaking of the leaves light." It is she who invented that exquisite spring phrase, "the singing woods," she who calls herself "lonely as a violet, easy to be hid," she who knows the love of mute insensate things: "I understand better than anyone in the world the sort of attachment one has for inanimate objects." How fresh and charming is the picture of her wading in the morning dew up to her knees to take an eager survey of her open-air possessions.

With that other joy of solitude, books, she is as engaging and as frank as with the natural world. It would be absurd to think of her as a pedant, or a blue-stocking. Any call of the normal feminine pursuits of life found her quickly and readily responsive, her best books cast into a corner, forgotten. Yet she did love them. "When I step into this library, I cannot understand why I ever step out of it." She can pass long hours wholly absorbed in new authors, or old ones. Her comments on the great French literature that was springing up about her are always fresh, shrewd, and suggestive. Of Racine's religious plays she says: "Racine has outdone himself; he loves God as he loves his mistresses; he enters into sacred things as he did into profane." La Fontaine she prized as one born under the same planet. He was gay like her, tender like her, loved the birds and flowers like her, and, like her, kept his tears in the closest contact with his laughter. I feel a certain yearning even in the words with which she socially condemns him: "You can only thank God for such a man and pray to have nothing to do with him."

But novels, novels! Assuredly no one ever loved them more than Madam de Sévigné, those interminable ten-volume romances of chivalry and sentiment, which she pored over as later generations pored over Richardson, or Scott, or Dumas, or Victor Hugo. No one has ever expressed more vivaciously than she the fascination we feel in these books, even when our cooler judgment laughs at them: "The style of La Calprenède is wretched in a thousand places: the swelling, romantic phrases, the ill-assorted words, I feel them all. I admit that such language is

detestable, and all the time the book holds me like glue. The beauty of the sentiments, the violence of the passions, the great scale of the incidents, and the miraculous success of the hero's redoubtable sword—it sweeps me away as if I were a girl again.”

Yet though she could make such rich and ample use of the resources of nature and books in solitude, she was the last person in the world to shrink from human society. As a friend she was exquisite. She practised friendship widely, yet discreetly, as one of the most delicious arts of life. “I am nice in my friendships and it is a business in which I am sufficiently expert.” She recognized those whom she felt to be akin to her, even when she knew them but by hearsay, and she mourns over the death of a friend's friend because she loved her, though, she says, “only by reverberation.”

She had friends of both sexes and all kinds. She was devoted alike to the magnificent Fouquet, the gay, volatile, and malicious Bussy, the brilliant, ardent Retz, the cynical La Rochefoucauld, the wise and quiet Corbinelli. It is difficult to say whether she loved most the grave, thoughtful, sentimental Madame de La Fayette, or Madame de Coulanges, with whom she could play the lightest, daintiest sort of epistolary battledore and shuttlecock. So souls were honest and right-minded and of stuff to knit loyally with hers, they were all acceptable to her.

For she was beautifully, nobly, femininely loyal in all these different friendships. Perhaps the best known of her letters are those in which she relates the trial of Fouquet on charges of maladministration in his great financial office. With what passionate eagerness does she record every detail from day to day, the judges' malevolence (as she views it), the varying testimony, the gradual approach of doom, and above all, the lofty, admirable bearing of the accused! With what indignant grief does she resent and resist—in spirit—the conviction and the punishment. And in lesser matters she has the same firm fidelity. Contagious illness, what is that in a matter of friendship? “I feel about infections as you do about precipices, there are people with whom I have no fear of them.” Disagreements, controversies, quarrels?

“For to be wroth with one we love  
Doth work like madness in the brain.”

"In our family," she says of one such, "we do not lose affection. The bonds may stretch and stretch, but they never break." And again, when she is hurt by coldness and indifference, she protests, "Ah, how easy it really is to live with me! A little gentleness, a little social impulse, a little confidence, even superficial, will lead me such a long way! I do believe that no one is more responsive than I in the daily intercourse of life."

Yet, though she had many friends and loved them, it must not be supposed that she was love-blinded or without keen insight into folly and weakness. She was a careful observer of the facts of human nature, and could say with Pepys, whom she resembles in some points, not in others, "I am in all things curious." Indeed, she herself remarks of one who had died in a rather unusual manner, "I perfectly understand your desire to see her. I should like to have been there myself. I love everything that is out of the common." And a sympathetic correspondent writes after Madame de Sévigné's own death: "You appear to have the taste of your late friend, who yearned for details and baptized them as 'the style of friendship.'"

One who looked so closely into souls, and especially one who was a near friend of La Rochefoucauld, could not escape some harsh conclusions, could not avoid seeing that all is not love that speaks kindly, nor all honor that pranks itself in stately phrase. Madame de Sévigné had her moments when she lost faith in humanity, moments of despair, moments of still more melancholy mocking. When she is most touched with the spirit of her cynical associate, she writes, "We like so much to hear people talk of us and of our motives, that we are charmed even when they abuse us." And again, "The desire to be singular and to astonish by ways out of the common seems to me to be the source of many virtues." One day, when she was especially out of sorts, she let her quick wit amuse itself imagining what it would be to take the roof off too many households that she knew and see inside the hate, the jealousy, the bickering, the pettiness that are veiled so carefully under the decorous fashions of the world.

Nevertheless, it would be wholly unjust to class her with La Rochefoucauld or with anyone who was a cynic by permanent

habit of thought. She observed men and women because she loved them. She knew that their faults were her faults and that what was good in her was to be found in them also. In no one is more obvious and unfailing the large spirit of tolerance and charity so well expressed by old Fagon, physician to King Louis the Fourteenth, "Il faut beaucoup pardonner à la nature." It is true that her native spirit of merriment cannot resist a good joke, however it comes. "Friendship," she says, "bids us be indignant with those who speak against our friends; but it does not forbid us to be amused when they speak wittily." Yet she had always and everywhere that deepest and most essential element of human kindness, the faculty of putting herself in another's place; and her sense of the laughable in trivial misfortunes was not so keen as her ready and active sympathy in great.

Therefore she was popular and widely beloved and greatly sought after. In her youth and even in her late maturity she was beautiful. Precisely because her beauty was less of the features than of the expression, it lasted longer than mere pink cheeks and delicate contours. Her soul laughed in her eyes and her merry and fortunate thoughts spoke as much in her gestures and the carriage of her body as in the quick grace of her Parisian tongue. And though no human being was less vain, she no doubt knew her charm, and prized it, and cultivated it in all due and proper ways. "There is nothing so lovely as to be beautiful. Beauty is a gift of God and we should cherish it as such."

*Delicious* is the word her friends most often use of her. "Your letters are delicious and so are you," writes one of them. "She was delicious to live with," says another. And her son-in-law, with whom she had sharp spats at times, yet declared that "delicious" was the true name for her society.

The fact is, she loved to be with men and women, and therefore they loved to be with her. Being flesh and blood, she sometimes tired of the invitations and festivities that were thrust upon her. There were receptions and entertainments without end, court functions and private functions. "I wish with all my soul I were out of here where they honor me too much. I am

hungry for privation and silence." And again, when the courtesies rained as thickly as blossoms in May, and tired nerves rebelled against late eating sauced with interminable chatter, "When, when can I die of hunger and keep still?" Also, being a creature of petulant wit, she could not fail occasionally to find average humanity—that is, you and me—somewhat tedious.

Yet she makes the best, even of such tediousness, in her kindly, human way, and turns it into gentle pleasantry. After all, she argues, it is much better to mix with bad company than good. Why? Because when the bad leaves you, you are not a bit sorry. But parting with those whose society is delightful leaves you utterly at a loss how to resume the common life of every day. Does not this last touch of hers recall many a poignant minute of your own? That is what makes Madame de Sévigné so charming, that in giving perfect expression to every shade of her feeling she is finding immortal utterance for your feelings and for mine. "Sometimes I am seized with the fancy to cry at a great ball, and sometimes I give way to my fancy, without anyone's ever knowing it."

Crying or laughing, she went to balls and banquets, and enjoyed them, and described them with the golden glow of her decorative imagination. "I went to the marriage of Mlle de Louvois. What shall I say about it? Magnificence, gorgeousness, all France, garments loaded and slashed with gold, jewels, a blaze of fires and flowers, a jam of coaches, cries in the street, torches flaring, poor folk thrust back and run over; in short, the usual whirlwind of nothing, questions not answered, compliments not meant, civilities addressed to no one in particular, and everybody's feet tangled up in everybody's gown." And she went home weary and resolved not to go again. And she went again—like all of us.

It will naturally be asked whether, in an age of too courtly morals, when exact virtue was not always insisted upon, perhaps not even expected, this gay young widow lived within the limits of propriety. It can only be said that the keenest scandal-mongers of the time—and none were ever keener—find no fault with her in this respect. She had passionate lovers of all sorts, princes, generals, statesmen, poets. She laughed with them all,



picked the fine flower of their adoration, and went on her way untouched, so far as it appears. What the passions were she knew well, as is shown clearly enough in the wonderful sentence in which she compares them to vipers, which may be bruised and crushed and torn and trampled, and still they move; you may tear their hearts out and still they move. But for her own, she flourished in spite of them, not perhaps with white innocence, but with royal self-possession.

And this self-possession was not wholly the outcome of coldness, nor even of balanced sanity. A large amount of spiritual elevation entered into it, a religious fervor which, if not always haunting, is rarely far away. Madame de Sévigné took nice and constant counsel for the welfare of her soul. With all her ample sense of the charm and solace of this world, she was very much alive to the awful immanence of another. Time flies, she says, "and I see it fly with horror, bringing me hideous old age, disease, and death." Again, "I find death so terrible, that I hate life more because it brings me to it than because of the thorns that strew the path." She assuages the horror with devout practice. On suitable occasions she resolves to withdraw from the world, pray and fast much, and "practice boredom for the love of God." She is a faithful and constant reader of the fathers and the moralists. She listens to the great sermons of Bossuet and Boraloue, and profits, though her shrewd wit is sometimes critical. Above all, she strives for a humble, earnest attitude of submission to the will of God everywhere and always. Without this, she thinks, life would be unbearable. The sense of His presence and of His guidance, the solution of sin and suffering by His all-controlling and all-loving will are never far from her. At moments she even rises to something of the mystic's joy.

Yet she was no mystic, but in this aspect of life also, a sane and normal woman, and it is delicious, because so human, to see how the pressure of the world returns upon her and crowds out even God. How charming is her naïve report of the verdict of a possible confessor: "I have seen the Abbé de la Vergne; we talked about my soul; he says that unless he can lock me up, not stir a step from me, take me to and from church himself, and neither let me read, speak, nor hear a single thing, he will

have nothing to do with me whatever." The saints, the saints! She envies them, of course. But they are so dowdy. The sinners are so much more agreeable. And the ways of this world are pleasant, pleasant. Dark thoughts, dark hours will intrude, will overcome us like a summer cloud, and then we get out Pascal or Nicole and hurry to the altar. Yes, she is mean and low and base, she says. When she sees people too happy it fills her with despair, which is not the fashion of a beautiful soul. She is not a beautiful soul, calls herself a soul of mud. How can any prayer, or any religion, or any God save her?

She has her moments, also, not of defiance, but of question whether it is worth while to make oneself unhappy. You must love my weaknesses, my faults," she says. "For my part, I put up with them well enough." After all, if she is lukewarm, and easy-going, and forgetful, so are others, millions of others. Why should she suffer for it more than they? "We practice salvation with the saints," she says, "and damnation with the children of this world." "We are not the devil's," she says, "because we fear God and because at bottom we have a touch of religion. We are not God's, either, because His law is hard and we do not wish to do ourselves a damage. This is the state of the lukewarm, and the great number of them does not distress me. I enter perfectly into their reasons. At the same time, God hates them and they ought to escape from their condition; but this is precisely the difficulty."

No one has portrayed more exquisitely than she the pitiful but human lightness of common souls in face of these enormous questions. "My saintly friend sometimes finds me as reasonable and serious as she would have me. And then a whiff of spring air, a ray of sunshine, sweeps away all the reflections of the twilight gloom." And it is she who framed the advice, dangerous or precious according to the heart it falls on, *Il faut glisser sur les pensées et ne pas les approfondir*. (It is sometimes best to slip over thoughts and not go to the bottom of them.)

So we have seen Madame de Sévigné to be in every respect a sweetly rounded nature, one of the most so, one of the most sane, normal, human women that have left the record of their souls for the careful study of posterity. Well, in this pure and perfect

crystal of balanced common-sense and judgment there was one most curious and interesting flaw,—the lady's love for her daughter. Love for her daughter? You repeat. And is not that the most sane and normal of possible characteristics in a woman?

It ought to be. But in Madame de Sévigné it certainly was not. She had two children, a daughter and a son. The son much resembled her, with some of her good qualities exaggerated into faults. He was gay and kindly; but he was light-headed and careless. Such as he was, his mother loved him with normal affection. She saw his weakness and tried to correct it. But she enjoyed his society, retained his confidence, and could be as merry with him as a summer's day, witness her inimitable account of his relating to her his comic parting from Ninon de l'Enclos: "He said the maddest things in the world and so did I. It was a scene worthy of Molière." Then, when he keeps bad company, behaves indiscreetly, and is generally reprehensible, she is aware of it at once and comments in no uncertain terms: "I wish you could see how little merit or beauty it takes to charm my son. His taste is beneath contempt."

But the daughter, Madame de Grignan, is a paragon, a miracle of nature, above admiration, and without defect. The bulk of Madame de Sévigné's correspondence is written to her, and what is much worse, it is written about her, page after page of advice, of anxiety, of adoration, until even dear lovers of the mother, like Fitzgerald, feel that, in her own vivid phrase, "they have had an indigestion of Grignans."

But this feeling of boredom vanishes as soon as you see that you are confronted with a psychological problem. For Madame de Sévigné's attitude, her language, are not that of a normal, not even of a passionately affectionate, mother. Her feeling in this case is an obsession, a real mania, like a girl's, or a grown woman's, genuine love affair. She cannot be happy one moment away from the object of her devotion. She thinks of her daily, nightly, dreams of her, in everything is anxious to please her, or sick to think she has not pleased her. She seeks solitude because there she can think more freely of this beloved daughter of hers. And the chief charm of society is that someone may inquire about Madame de Grignan's health and venture a com-

pliment which the eager listener can set down and pass on. Like a lover of twenty, she suggests that she and her beloved are looking at the moon at the same hour. "You alone," she writes, in the ardor of her passion, "can make the joy or the sorrow of my life. I know nothing but you, and beyond you everything is nothing to me." Over and over again she repeats that she wishes she loved God as she loves this bit of herself, this thing of mortal, but exquisite fragility. Now that is not quite the tone of a common, sane, and normal mother, is it?

And the daughter, did she deserve it? Most think not. Saint-Simon, who charmingly eulogized the mother by saying that her wit was so sympathetic that it bred wit in those she talked with, speaks of Madame de Grignan very differently. "In spite of all that Madame de Sévigné says in her letters," he writes, "she died very little regretted by her husband, her family, or her neighbors." Beautiful she undeniably was. Also she was a scholar, a pupil of Descartes, a reader of philosophies, and critic of literature, who looked down a little on her mother's naïve and extremely personal judgments. She was a wit, wrote what she thought fine letters. They seem to us a little stilted, as the one she sent to Moulceau after her mother's death. And some say she was without her mother's broad sympathy and apt to be passionate and quarrelsome.

But all these things were nothing to the mother lover. It is, indeed, pretty to observe how, being the keenest-sighted of women, she occasionally sees things that she will not see. Thus, she writes of her daughter's boasted style, "It is perfect. All you have to do is to keep it as it is and not try to improve it." Or, of the daughter's attitude towards herself: "Somebody said the other day that, with all the tender affection you have for me, you don't get as much out of my society as you might, that you do not appreciate what I am worth, even as regards you."

For the most part, however, it is a sweet, warm tempest of praise, an indigestion of praise, touchingly at variance with the chilly judgment of those who looked on. Madame de Grignan has not only the choicest of intellects, but the tenderest of hearts. She has a stoical, old Roman virtue, which the vulgar may mistake for indifference; but underneath she is so sur-

prisingly sensitive that every precaution is necessary to guard her too delicate nerves from intolerable shock. She thinks loftily, she speaks wittily, and her letters are the quintessence of everything finished and exquisite, so different from the hasty and careless scrawls of this scribbling mother, though, to be sure, good judges have found ours also not unworthy of commendation. Some, who do not believe that a love that takes us out of ourselves is the best worth having of all things in this loveless world, may think such a degree of self-deception puerile. It is a little unusual, at any rate.

Such a love, in a universe of cross accidents and unforeseen contingencies, is always shot through and through with misery. This woman, so poised and tempered in all that concerned herself and the common course of life, lived in a cloud of anxiety for what concerned the welfare of her precious daughter. It was worry, worry from morning till night. In far Provence, where the treasure and her husband and children dwelt, what disasters might not occur, while the sun was shining and wit sparkling in jovial Paris. With the lovely inconsistency of love, the mother declares at one moment that her passion is all joy and the delight of it far, far outweighs the care and trouble; at the next, that life is only wretchedness for those who have a great devotion. "The mind should be at peace," she says; "but the heart debauches it perpetually. Mine is filled full with my daughter." She frets over great things and little, Madame de Grignan's children, Madame de Grignan's debts, Madame de Grignan's lawsuits, above all over Madame de Grignan's health. The daughter was, apparently, one of those persons who are never ill and never well. And the doting mother, at five hundred miles' distance, is always suggesting drugs, draughts, plasters, poultices, doctors, doctors' devices, and devices of the devil.

Also, in the rare intervals when they were together, she suggested to the same effect, and in consequence such sojourns were not happy. I know few things more tragic than this vast affection longing, longing to be with its object, and when they did meet, thwarted, hampered, blighted by that fatal inadequacy of human contact which makes love's fine fruition a joy not of this transitory world. We have, of course, little record of

things actually done or said while the lover and the beloved were together. But we have the piteous cry of the bereaved one when they had felt themselves compelled to part. "Was it a crime for me to be anxious about your health? I saw you perishing before my eyes, and I was not permitted to shed a tear. I was killing you, they said, I was murdering you. I must keep still, if I suffocated. I never knew a more ingenious and cruel torment." Or again: "In God's name, child, let us try another visit to reestablish our reputation. We must be more reasonable, at least you must, and not give them occasion to say, 'You simply kill one another.' " With what a strangled clutch does she tear at her heart, in the effort to make those adjustments of human passion which can never be perfectly made by flesh and blood. "You speak like one who is even further from me than I thought; who has wholly forgotten me, who no longer understands the measure of my attachment, nor the tenderness of my heart, who knows no longer the devotion I have for her, nor that natural weakness and bent to tears which have been an object of mocking to your philosophic firmness."

But it makes no difference. In spite of presence, or absence, or indifference, the old wound keeps still and always fresh and bleeding. Still, still the longing heart cries out for what it needs, even if it can never obtain it: "How is it that my whole life turns on one sole thought and everything else appears to me to be nothing?" Only God can comfort her. "Everything must be given up for God, and I will do it, and will only wonder at His ways, who, when all things seem as if they should be well with us, opens great gulfs which swallow the whole good of life, a separation which wounds my heart every hour of the day and far more hours of the night than sense or reason would."

Thus, you see, this sweet and noble lady, whose robust strength it seems as if we might all envy, also carried her burden of spiritual grief. Assuredly she is the more charming for it. As she herself said: "In the midst of all my moralizing, I keep a good share of the frailty of humanity." Thank God, she did.

GAMALIEL BRADFORD.

Wellesley Hills, Mass.